



News Release

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Valley Fever fungus poses new health risk to Washington

Public health officials look to learn more about the disease-causing fungus

OLYMPIA — Public health officials are teaming up to fight a new public health threat in Washington – Valley Fever.

Since discovering the fungus that causes Valley Fever in South Central Washington last year, health officials have been monitoring for disease and conducting environmental testing to determine how widespread the fungus may be.

“This recent discovery is puzzling because there’s a large distance between Washington and other areas of the country where the fungus is found,” said State Health Officer Dr. Kathy Lofy. “It’s important to let our health care community know about the presence of the fungus in Washington, because early diagnosis and treatment of the disease results in better outcomes for patients.”

“Valley Fever” (coccidioidomycosis) is a disease caused by a pathogenic fungus that grows in soils with specific environmental conditions. The fungus is typically found in the Southwestern United States, as well as parts of Central and South America. Washington public health officials have tracked down eight local cases from Walla Walla, Benton, Franklin, and Yakima counties during the past five years. Soil samples collected from areas where the people might have been exposed were sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for analysis. The results came back positive for the fungus. Follow-up soil collection also turned up positive results in the same area.

About 60 percent of people who are infected with Valley Fever never develop symptoms. The people who do have symptoms may experience mild flu-like symptoms with fatigue fever, and a

cough that may be accompanied by a rash, headache, body aches, night sweats, or shortness of breath. A very small percent of people who become symptomatic may develop serious or long-term problems in their lungs. In even fewer people – about 1 out of 100 – the infection spreads from the lungs to other parts of the body, such as the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord), skin, or bones and joints.

Although the risk in Washington is thought to be very low, anyone can get Valley Fever, even young and healthy people. Those at higher risk for severe illness include people with weakened immune systems, pregnant women, people who have diabetes, people taking chronic corticosteroid therapy, and people of African or Filipino descent. People who work outdoors in jobs that generate a lot of dust may be more likely to be exposed to the fungus.

“We’re still learning about the fungus and its presence in our state, and we’ll continue studying it to better understand who is at risk,” Lofy said. “We’re working closely with our partners in local health agencies and at CDC to carry out studies this year.”

A public open house is scheduled for 7 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, May 28th to discuss the topic at the Benton-Franklin Health District office located at 7102 West Okanogan Place in Kennewick. Federal, state and local health officials will be on-hand to provide information answer questions for local residents.

The [Department of Health website](http://www.doh.wa.gov) (www.doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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